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PROGRAM All Things Considered

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SUBJECT Daniel Schorr Comments on Efforts to Plug Leaks

MARGO ADLER: The FBI has formed a new unit to investigate leaks of sensitive government information to the news media. News analyst Daniel Schorr says that he finds disturbing symmetry in that news and the alleged spreading of disinformation by the National Security Agency.

DANIEL SCHORR: The FBI's four-man seekers-of-leakers team would have been known in Nixon times as the plumbers, but might today be more aptly labeled as the keister cops, referring to what President Reagan has said he is up to in leaks.

One of the unit's first reported assignments, not surprisingly, is the leak last June of a secret report of the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, PFIAB to us insiders. The report excoriated the FBI and the CIA for mishandling the case of Edward Lee Howard, the discharged CIA agent who blew the agency's operations in Moscow, was fingered by defector Vitaly Yurchenko, escaped while under 24-hour FBI surveillance and defected to the Soviet Union.

What the keister cops are supposed to investigate is not how Howard got away, let alone why Yurchenko went away, but how word of the criticism got away.

One trouble the leak-seekers may run into is distinguishing between authorized and unauthorized leaks. In 1983 President Reagan ordered a full-scale FBI investigation, with polygraph tests, because of a leak that Robert McFarlane, then in Lebanon, had sent a cable recommending an air strike against Syrian positions endangering the American Marines. Three months later, the FBI concluded that the source of the information had been a White House briefing. And what's more, McFarlane told me

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that he never sent any such cable.

Which brings us to the dark arts of deception loosely called disinformation. The manipulation of false information is a practice more associated with totalitarian than with democratic governments.

For example, the Reagan Administration in 1981 was apparently the victim of a Libyan hoax. Information was fed through intelligence channels about a hit squad on its way to assassinate high American officials, including the President. Massive security measures were taken. No hard evidence of a hit squad ever turned up. The FBI finally concluded that the CIA had been deceived.

Now, according to the Washington Post, the National Security Council has been playing a deception game against Qaddafi. And that raises problems. One problem is that after revelations of the abuse of the American press back in the 1970s, the Ford Administration promised that false information would never again be fed to the American media. The foreign press is okay, of course.

Another problem is that it will take a lot of coordination between agencies for the FBI to be sure when tracking down an information leak that it is not on the trail of a disinformation leak.